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ABSTRACT

Efforts at one high school to reconsider its practices of ability grouping and explore alternative assessment and grouping practices are described. Assessment of the schools' practices found that students in lower ability groups had a less stimulating curriculum, fewer positive role models, lower motivation, lower expectations for themselves, and worked with teachers who also held lower expectations for them. When mobility did take place between ability levels, it was more often downward than upward. The use of national standardized placement tests was replaced by teacher-designed, criterion-referenced assessment tools, resulting in significantly different balances of placements. A pilot program was launched to replace a remedial composition course with participation in regular level classes supplemented by ongoing lunch hour tutoring in composition, resulting in improved grades for participants. The success of this program led the school to eliminate lower ability levels in other content areas, and to modify curriculum in remaining lower-level courses. A variety of modifications were implemented to support heterogenous grouping, including expanded use of cooperative learning and classroom workshops. Staff development is seen as essential to the future of these modifications. (PB)

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ED 384 610

DESIGNING MORE EFFECTIVE GROUPING PRACTICES AT THE HIGH SCHOOL LEVEL

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Running Head: Grouping Practices

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Research on tracking and ability grouping has sparked a great debate among educational leaders. Should we continue with our current grouping practices; eliminate ability grouping altogether; modify current practices; or look for alternatives? How do we know what to do? Is the research even applicable to our school? These questions have received emotionally charged responses in many schools.

High schools in particular have become dependent upon their tracking and ability grouping practices. These grouping practices are used as a means for dealing with the vast differences in students' abilities. Some students are enrolled in "remedial" courses while others pursue a more rigorous college preparatory program. How do high schools break away from these traditional practices that allegedly promote social and instructional inequities? How could high schools organize their curricula and/or modify instructional practices to promote positive educational experiences for *all* students?

Grouping students for instruction according to their perceived levels of ability is a long-standing practice in most schools throughout the country. It is common to have classes in the core curriculum geared to different levels of student ability. The rationale is that the academic needs of all students will be better met when they learn in groups with similar capabilities or comparable levels of achievement. Students with high ability are able to move at a faster pace, cover more material, and receive greater challenges. Students with low ability are able to move at a slower pace in order to gain understanding, remediate deficiencies, and ultimately increase achievement. Because of vast differences in students' prior achievement, ability

grouping has been considered to be the most efficient method of addressing individual needs and coping with individual differences.

Interpreting The Research and Rhetoric on Instructional Grouping

In recent years however, there has been substantial criticism of traditional ability grouping practices. A growing body of research refutes the long-standing and widely held assumptions that have supported ability grouping for nearly one hundred years. This research suggests that there are many undesirable and negative effects, especially in lower-level classes. Citing academic and social inequities, several educational researchers and theorists now advocate doing away with current practice and prescribe a more heterogeneous learning environment.

Unfortunately, these educational authorities have not provided a model to follow in order to remedy the alleged inequities in ability grouping. Indeed, most would concur that there is no model. Their opinions vary greatly on directions for reforming the organization and delivery of curriculum to promote positive learning experiences for all students. Some espouse alternatives that require relatively minor modifications of instructional practices while maintaining current organizational structure. Other alternatives are more complex and require more substantial changes in the instructional practices or organizational patterns of schools.

Oakes (1988) states that heterogeneous groups will probably do best where curriculum content is challenging, complex, related to real life, and rich with

meaning. She advocates that the curriculum be organized around central themes of a subject area rather than around disconnected topics and skills to allow students the greatest chance of enhancing their intellectual development. In a concept-based curriculum, Oakes believes that skill differences among students will diminish as an obstacle to teaching due to opportunities that exist for multiple right answers and multiple routes to success.

Slavin (1987a) suggests alternative means of grouping students for instruction that do not produce the negative results of between-class ability grouping. These include the Joplin Plan, within-class ability grouping, and cooperative learning. Discussing effective ability grouping practices, Slavin (1987b) recommends the following: 1) The primary grouping arrangement should be heterogeneous. Ability grouping is recommended on a limited basis for subjects such as math and reading, where it is important to reduce heterogeneity. 2) Homogeneous grouping should be based on skill levels and should be done across grade levels when possible. 3) Reassessment should be frequent and grouping plans should be flexible to accommodate regrouping. 4) The levels and pace of instruction should vary to correspond to students' readiness and learning rates. 5) When within-class ability grouping is used, groups should be few in number to allow adequate direct instructional time.

Gursky (1990) advocates team teaching students of varying abilities in heterogeneous classrooms. He proposes that information be presented to students in a large group. Students should then be broken up to form groups frequently and in a variety of ways. One teacher instructs the large group while the other works

with individuals or small groups who may need additional instruction.

Dawson (1987) proposes that the classroom composition should be heterogeneous, with a preponderance of average and above average learners. Low achieving students should make up less than one-third of the class. These heterogeneous classes should communicate the same achievement expectations for both high and low achieving students.

Other authorities have developed or resurrected a myriad of strategies for instruction or methods for the organization of curriculum that they believe will accommodate the diversity of student ability in a heterogeneous classroom. Many of the ideas being advocated fall into the following categories:

- a more authentic assessment of student learning
- an interdisciplinary curriculum
- a concept-based curriculum
- cooperative learning
- mastery learning
- outcomes-based education
- programs for "at risk" students

How, then, does one school assimilate all of the research and rhetoric to establish a position that either supports current practice or articulates a direction for purposeful reform? Should ability grouping be eliminated completely? Should existing practices be modified? Should alternatives to ability grouping be sought out? Does the research even apply to our school? These are but a few of the questions we began to ask ourselves at Stevenson High School.

It was our belief that before we were able to confidently advance any reform efforts, we had to understand the instructional grouping practices that we had in place. This called for critical reflection to determine the impact that our instructional grouping practices had on students, curriculum, instructional practices and student learning.

The Way We Were

While Stevenson High School, a comprehensive four-year high school in Chicago's northern suburbs, never formally offered "tracks" such as vocational, general, or college preparatory, it did in fact offer all the courses in its core curriculum on as many as five ability levels. These ability levels created a "de facto" tracking system for many students. It is true that a student could be in a high or advanced ability group for one subject (e.g. math) and be in an average or below average group for another (e.g. English). This separated Stevenson's model from more traditional tracking systems where students are tracked in the same level or program for all subjects. However, the Stevenson model of assigning students to ability groups did, in fact, tend to keep students from moving to other ability groups within subjects later in their academic career at the school, creating a subject-based tracking program.

This process began with the sorting and selecting of incoming freshmen students each spring. Students were testing using the California Achievement Test, a nationally normed test which also yielded local norms. This test had little direct

relevance to actual curriculum offered at Stevenson, other than its ability to measure general reading skills with a given level of comprehension and vocabulary, and a working knowledge of basic mathematical functions. Using the locally normed test results, students were placed into various ability groups in mathematics and English. Their placement in science and social studies was contingent upon their English placement because of the importance of reading skills in these disciplines. Thus the beginning of a de facto tracking system. Placement into specific ability groups was a fairly simple matter. Student scoring in the top fifteen percent of the local test group were placed in the accelerated program in that subject (math or English/science/social studies). Similarly, students placing in the lowest decile were enrolled in the remedial classes in these same programs. Those scoring in the middle seventy five percent were placed in either the regular or modified programs, depending on whether they scored in the higher or lower ranges of this large, middle group. In math, the situation was further complicated by the creation of an honors program for the very top of the upper fifteen percent who qualified for the accelerated program. It is clear that Stevenson had become quite proficient at selecting and sorting its students and assigning them accordingly.

The ability grouping / tracking system was perpetuated by several other, less obvious practices. Perhaps the most important of these was the content of the curricula taught at the different levels. It is most easily characterized as diluted and slower for students in the lower groups and enriched and faster for students in the upper groups. For example, in English classes, freshman students in the upper groups studied not only literature and composition, but also completed the speech

curriculum which most students took as sophomores while their peers in the remedial program studied reading - not literature - and had no exposure to speech skills at all. Students in the accelerated English program, as sophomores went on to study a traditional American literature program while their regular level classmates took speech and composition. The remedial level sophomores continue their study of reading skills combined with some basic speech experiences. This program made it difficult if not impossible for a student to ever leave the ability group to which he/she had been assigned as an entering freshman. Students wishing to enter the accelerated program had to double enroll in English as sophomores in order to complete the required speech curriculum while pursuing the accelerated American literature program simultaneously. Students wanting to leave the remedial program found themselves ill-prepared for the regular curriculum because they had not pursued a study of literature nor had the expectations for them in composition approached the level of their regular level peers. This model was paralleled in the mathematics program, where remedial level students were taught mathematics and pre-algebra, thus creating a year-long gap between them and their regular level classmates. Because of the year lag at the beginning of the program, math students from the lower end of the spectrum were never able to enter the higher level math classes nor to have access to the same concepts or information. Thus the self-perpetuating cycle began; students who began as remedial level students received diminished, content-thin courses and finished as remedial students, while students starting on the accelerated level received enriched, challenging classes and generally finished as accelerated students. Even those who could overcome the deficits of the

remedial curriculum found the logistics of maneuvering the complicated course sequence too difficult and/or time consuming.

The inequities and difficulties of the system became increasingly apparent, and when the school administration and faculty assessed its impact the following was found generally to be true:

1. Students in lower ability group classes received curricula that was less content rich, less conceptual, and more skill and drill oriented.

2. Students in lower ability group classes were less motivated, less likely to achieve, and had fewer positive role models.

3. Students in lower ability classes received more disciplinary attention and had higher incidents of off task behavior than their higher level classmates.

4. Students in lower ability group classes consistently scored lower on all school proficiency tests than their classmates, even after three years of specific remedial instruction.

5. Students in lower ability group classes had lower expectations for themselves and lower self esteem.

6. Teachers of lower ability level students also had lower expectations for these students.

7. Students rarely moved from one ability level to another; when movement occurred it was more often downward rather than upward.

Clearly, our instructional grouping practices were working for some of our students, but were also very detrimental to many others. Consistently low achievement by remedial level students, even after receiving the supposed benefits

of the program for two or more years, also made it clear that the program was not working as planned. Our accelerated programs, culminating in advanced placement classes, were meeting with considerable success. These students were profiting from enrichment and acceleration. The challenge was to find a way to maintain the good qualities of our grouping practices at the upper end of the spectrum while eliminating the obvious failings and negative effects of our grouping policies at the opposite end of the scale. We found that these changes needed to be addressed in two ways, or in two arenas, almost simultaneously. The school administration needed to change its way of thinking about organizing the curriculum while teachers needed to be open to changing, not only what they taught, but *how* they taught.

Modifications That Were Made

The school administration had to make a commitment to change its philosophy concerning instructional grouping and its long standing practices in this area. At the same time, it needed to support the teachers in their efforts to change instructional methods and to create appropriate programs needed to work effectively with more heterogeneous classes. The first challenge, that of making changes at the administrative level concerning programs and practices began with a series of pilot programs.

Changing placement procedures in math and English

The initial change took place in the process of assessing and placing incoming freshman. No longer would the placement of students depend upon their performance on a standardized test having only tangental bearing on the actual curriculum they would face in the high school. No longer would access to programs be a function of percentiles or local norms. Instead, the teachers from the high school mathematics and English departments met with their counterparts from the local junior high schools. Together, they decided what was needed for success in the high school curricula and what it was reasonable for the secondary level teachers to expect in terms of skills and proficiencies. Criterion referenced tests assessing these skills and expectations were then developed locally, creating a match between what was taught, what was expected, and what was tested. The test was piloted with a series of students already identified as successful freshman students in their level of the curriculum, and their performance of the new tests became the criteria for placement of future freshman. This process became more refined as the test was given repeatedly, developing a history and validity. Even though ability grouping at all levels still existed, this change in assessment and placement began to have a profound effect. The artificial caps of fifteen percent for accelerated and ten percent for remedial were removed. All students meeting the criteria as tested and measured on the new, locally developed CRTs for math and English were enrolled in the appropriate level. The immediate result was the doubling of the number of students in the upper level courses and the reduction by fifty percent of those enrolled in the remedial program. It became clear that when teachers identified

essential skills for a course, developed a means to measure those skills, and concentrated instruction on those skills, student achievement improved remarkably. This was supported further by the creation of a summer enrichment program for students not meeting the standards set by the CRT. They were encouraged to attend special summer classes which address their specific deficiencies and were then invited to re-test. Those meeting expectations after the additional instruction and testing were then enrolled in the more advanced groups. This began a natural attrition of students and courses at the lower end of the ability spectrum. Goals and expectations were clearly set and measured; those not meeting them were offered a means of addressing weaknesses; and significantly fewer students began their high school careers receiving remedial, less content-rich curricula.

Another interesting phenomena also occurred. It might be anticipated that because so many more students were enrolled in higher level courses, that grades would drop in general and that there would be more call for movement to lower, supposedly easier courses. In fact, the opposite occurred. The numbers of "A"s and "B"s not only held steady, they actually increased slightly. Similarly, the number of requests for level changes actually decreased from previous years, even though there were more students enrolled in the school than ever before.

Initiating a pilot program in junior English

The next step was to formally address the existence of lower level ability groups. This was initially done by the English department beginning with the low ability composition program in the junior year. It occurred here first because this

was a program whose clientele were there because of a demonstrated inability to write according to department standards. All students were assessed in the area of composition at the end of their sophomore year; those not meeting expectations were placed in a continuation of the freshman/sophomore remedial English program. The majority of students not meeting expectation were indeed already in the remedial program, creating a self-fulfilling prophecy of failure. It was abundantly clear that the junior program was not working as expected for its students, at the end of their eleventh grade year were re-tested, assessed against the same criteria as the year before, and traditionally over one half failed the test a second time. Teaching students in remedial groups, even though they might be smaller and the material more tailored to their needs, was not working. A pilot program was begun.

Initially, one half of the students slated for the junior remedial composition program were instead enrolled in the regular level class and, at the same time, required to attend a three-times-a-week tutorial in composition. The mandatory tutorial took the place of a study hall or the students' unscheduled time -- for some it was also their lunch and they were allowed to eat lunch during the tutorial sessions. Students reported to the schools reading/writing center and worked with a teacher/tutor, usually one-to-one or in small groups of not more than three or four. They continued these weekly tutorials until they were able to compose an essay which meet department expectations for expository prose and until they maintained a grade of at least a "C-" in their regular level Junior English class. Meanwhile, their counterparts continued in the remedial composition program. The results were

most encouraging. Within the first twelve weeks, half of the students in the pilot program had earned at least a "C-" in the regular level class and had also been able to write an essay, under assessment conditions, which demonstrated proficiency. By the end of the semester, eighty percent of the students met these criteria. In the spring of the junior year, when their counterparts were assessed as usual in writing proficiency and, as usual, only about one half of them passed, it became clear that the pilot had indeed worked. Not only had all but a handful been able to write and pass the composition proficiency essay, they had earned grades of "C-" or better in a higher level Junior English course, where they had been subject to higher expectations and more challenging content. The success of this pilot program in 1989-90 gave us the confidence and experience not only to expand this program for all incoming juniors who had failed the writing proficiency assessment, thus eliminating the junior level remedial program, but to take a similar approach to working with our incoming freshmen in 1990-91.

Initiating a pilot program in freshman English

The pattern used with our "modified" level freshman closely paralleled the junior pilot program. Instead of being placed in a lower ability level class, one half of the eligible incoming freshmen instead were enrolled in lunch hour tutorials in combination with regular level placement. The results for these twenty seven students, especially over a two year period, were very gratifying. It is important to note that while the program did not create any "instant scholars" it did produce steadily improving grades at a higher level of academic expectations than would

otherwise have been the case. There was a constant increase in the number of "C"s and a decrease in the number of "D"s earned by these students over the two-year period. These grades were earned in the regular level program and continued during the sophomore year, even though the students were no longer required to participate in weekly tutorials. The results, over a four semester sequence, were as follows:

Regular Level		**Regular Level**	
Freshman English Grades		**Sophomore English Grades**	
1990-91 School Year		**1991-92 School Year**	
1st Semester/2nd Semester		1st Semester/2nd Semester	
A = 0	A = 0	A = 0	A=0
B = 1	B = 3	B = 5	B = 2
C = 4	C = 10	C = 12	C = 17
D = 22	D = 11	D = 9	D = 8
F = 0	F = 3	F = 1	F = 0

In 1991-92 the modified level of Freshman English was dropped from the curriculum. Replacing these lower ability level classes were tutorials set up for any student whose grade in the standard level program dropped to a "D+" or lower. Twice-a-week sessions, stressing reading, writing, and study skills, were required until the student's grade reached at least a "C-" for the grading period. The only

students still enrolled in any low ability grouped class were those diagnosed with learning or behavioral disabilities deemed severe enough to impede not only their learning but that of their classmates as well. This amounted to less than five percent of the freshman class; all others were enrolled either in regular or accelerated levels of English. Most students responded well to tutoring and were able to function successfully on the regular level. Those who could not received tutorials and continued in this special additional program ("retained" column) throughout the school year. The tutorials took the place of the mandatory freshman study hall twice a week. The results of this program are outlined below:

# Assigned	#Meeting	#Retained	#Special
Oct./Nov., 1991	Expectations		Services
34	13 = 38%	13 = 38%	8 = 24%
Dec./Jan., !991-92			
38	21 = 55%	12 = 31%	5 = 14%
Feb./Mar., 1992			
26	18 = 69%	5 = 19%	3 = 12%
Apr./May, 1992			
33	19 = 58%	14 = 42%	-0-

It is important to remember that virtually all students were now being asked to meet the expectations of the regular level course. The number of students

assigned to the tutorials each grading period represent less than ten percent of the freshman class. The majority of the students proved able to perform at least a "C" level or better.

Finally, it is interesting to study the four-year grade distribution in the three directly impacted levels of Freshman English. The 1991-92 figures are especially interesting as the modified level is eliminated, integrating what had been as much as thirteen percent of the freshman class into the regular level program. In spite of this, the grade distribution remained remarkably steady, with no more variation than in previous years with no change in the students' supposed "official" abilities.

Regular/College Preparatory Level:

1988-89	**1989-90**	**1990-91**	**1991-92**
# Enrolled	**# Enrolled**	**# Enrolled**	**# Enrolled**
236/52%	263/53%	339/60%	422/67%
% A = 14	% A = 11	% A = 13	% A = 15
% B = 51	% B = 47	% B = 51	% B = 49
% C = 27	% C = 31	% C = 32	% C = 28
% D = 5	% D = 9	% D = 4	% D = 7
% F = 2	% F = 2	% F = 1	% F = 1

Both of these programs, and the ultimate grade distribution, support the contention that ability grouping at the lower end of the spectrum does not serve our students as well as integrating them into our regular level classes and providing extra assistance if and when needed. They provided enough evidence to call for the elimination of the modified level for sophomores, juniors and seniors as well as

freshmen; all English students, except for a few special needs students, are now enrolled in either regular or accelerated level classes.

Eliminating lower ability levels in other areas

The success of the pilot programs in English provided the impetus to address the elimination of the lower levels in other core curriculum courses. Again, there were as many as five ability levels in the core curriculum. From lowest to highest they were: basic, modified, regular/college preparatory, accelerated and advanced placement. Administrators, in cooperation with faculty members who taught lower level courses, examined the course offerings in social studies, science, math and foreign language.

In social studies it was determined that the basic levels of government and U. S. history be eliminated. These courses would now be offered to juniors and seniors at the regular/college preparatory and advanced placement levels only. Modern World History eliminated the basic level, leaving the course offered only at the regular/college preparatory level for underclassmen. Economics dropped the basic level, leaving the course offered at the modified, regular/college preparatory and advanced placement levels for juniors and seniors. Foreign language dropped the modified level in Spanish I and II and in French I and II. The first year of these courses would be offered only at the regular/college preparatory level, while the second, third, and fourth years would be offered at the regular/ college preparatory and accelerated levels. The fifth year would be offered at the advanced placement level. Junior and senior courses in science dropped the basic and modified levels, leaving only the regular/college

preparatory, accelerated and advanced placement levels. Fourth year mathematics classes dropped all basic and modified levels of courses.

Lower achieving students who would have been placed in the eliminated lower levels were now to be placed in the next higher level. Emphasis was placed on accommodating these students in the higher level courses by adjusting teaching practices and providing opportunities for tutorial support in departmental resource centers. Teacher expectations and course objectives were not altered.

Adjusting course content in the remaining lower level courses

In addition to changes in teaching strategies, there need to be basic changes in how curriculum content is organized. Curricula which are less rich for students who low achieving have to be avoided. These inevitably lead the downward spiraling syndrome described earlier in this chapter. Equally exciting, intense, relevant, and challenging material must be available to all students; the differences should exist, if at all, only in the method of delivery. All students should have access to higher knowledge, to what Goodlad (1984) calls "gatekeeper" concepts and information, without which students can never move up the education ladder.

While it was decided to retain some lower levels in economics, science and math, the course content at these lower levels was adjusted. Previously, these courses tended to have "watered down" curricula. The course content was modified to contain the same concepts and topics as their higher level counterparts. The goal was to provide students in these lower levels with exposure to the same curriculum as in the higher level courses, but with less

depth. Although the lower levels were still less rigorous, they offered students access to the same knowledge taught in the higher levels. It would now be possible for students who were successful at these lower levels to move up to a higher level, since the knowledge base at both levels was similar. Not only was it now more feasible for a student to advance to a higher level, this movement actually became the expectation. With most lower level courses eliminated for juniors and seniors, remaining lower level courses for underclassmen became preparatory courses for a higher level.

Modifying instructional practices

Simply rearranging the way in which students are grouped, changing what levels are or are not offered, or making other administrative level changes in the orchestration of the curriculum is not enough. Along with the creation of programs to support students in more difficult and challenging courses, teachers need to be supported and even educated in the necessary changes called for in more heterogeneous classes. Inservice and other educational opportunities have to accompany the organizational changes in the curriculum. The changes in instructional methodology brought about because of the changes in our instructional grouping have been many and profound.

With a wider spectrum of student abilities in the English classrooms, the challenge has been to maintain the quality of instruction while changing various aspects of its delivery and assessment. One of the most significant changes has been the increased focus on process learning. This means that more time is spent in the

developmental stages of reading and writing; more time is spent in the classroom working both with the teacher and with fellow students on the actual processes of reading, writing, and speaking. The more traditional model casts the teacher in the role of telling the students what to do and then sending them home, with homework, to do it. There was relatively little input or exchange of information between the initial assignment of tasks and its ultimate evaluation by the teacher. Students either "got it" or they didn't, and they were rewarded accordingly. Heterogeneous classes call for far more interaction between the teacher and the students as concepts are developed and practiced. This leads to a "workshopping" atmosphere, where students learn together, often in teams or small groups, and may be pursuing different activities at different paces.

Classroom workshops become commonplace in both reading and writing classrooms. Students are encouraged to set personal learning goals and combine them with teacher set objectives for the class. Cooperative learning is an integral part of the classroom workshop, and it actively engages students of various talents and abilities in mutually beneficial learning experiences. Much of the teacher-based instruction is presented in the form of ten to fifteen minute mini-lessons which are highly focused on skills for the entire class or in small groups. Students also take a much more active role as audiences for each others' learning as well as fellow critics and evaluators. Overall, heterogeneous classrooms are much less teacher-centered and more focused on direct student engagement. More time is spent practicing skills, developing concepts, and solving problems, and less time is devoted to having teachers present information.

The realignment of the curriculum in lower level math classes posed a challenge to math teachers. As algebraic concepts replaced lower level arithmetic concepts, teachers realized the need to develop different types of teaching strategies. What proved to be most effective was the implementation of the teaching strategies advocated in the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM) Standards. Math classrooms have taken on a completely different appearance. Formerly passive notetakers, students now became active participants in classroom instruction. The classrooms came alive. Teachers began to relate mathematics to real life situations; students worked together; applications and problem solving strategies were emphasized, rather than right answers. Teachers connected mathematics to the real world. The NCTM Standards have been a valuable resource for guiding math teachers' instructional practices.

Modifying assessment practices

Educators, historically, have viewed evaluation as summative more than formative. Students are not given feedback until the task is finished, the unit completed, the speech delivered. At this point, all too often, the feedback is too late, ineffectual, and punitive. Assessment needs to take place throughout the learning process; it needs to be more formative and less summative. Students need both formal and informal feedback from their teachers and their peers as they work through the reading of a book, the preparation of a speech, or the development of a report. Conferencing, an important element of classroom workshops, is also a major strategy for formative assessment. In addition to conferences, teachers assess

student learning through actual performances and the collection of student work in portfolios. Clearly, there is an appropriate time and place for traditional, summative testing, but it should not be the prevalent means of assessing student learning. Teachers and administrators need to learn alternate methods of assessing student learning.

Teachers at Stevenson are beginning to take less of a sorting and selecting stance in their grading practices and are focusing more on a teaching and learning approach. If a student is not satisfied with a test score during the marking period, some teachers allow students to take an alternate or cumulative exam and have that score replace the previous one. This opportunity gives students the ability to have control over their grade and stimulates their motivation and effort. Frequently, teachers have students work in groups on projects, quizzes, assignments, or tests. The assessments may be either formative or summative and students may receive an individual grade and/or a group grade. The notion that a student has to work in isolation and without any resources to solve problems or create something is generally viewed as atypical of real life situations and of little value for the student. Journal writing has been introduced as a means to formatively assess student understanding in subjects other than English. In algebra classes, for example, students write in their journals at the end of the period. Depending on how teachers structure the journal writing, it can easily be determined whether students have grasped the important parts of the lesson, whether students can apply what they learned in class, or whether students are able to connect information. Assessing the information in student journals also gives the teacher important

feedback on the effectiveness of instructional strategies and classroom activities.

As we continue to modify our instructional practices to accommodate increased diversity in student ability, we must also continue to develop assessments that more accurately reflect student learning. Emphasis is being placed on formative assessments that chart a student's growth in learning, rather than on summative assessments that generally do not provide meaningful feedback. Assessments are also becoming more varied, allowing students to demonstrate learning in ways that reflect their dominant learning styles and their interests.

Developing programs that support heterogeneous grouping

Accommodating greater diversity of student abilities in the classroom can and should be supported by other school-wide programs that are not department specific. These programs should not be based on pulling students out of a heterogeneous environment, rather they should support teachers' and students' efforts in that arena.

The longest running program of this type at Stevenson is Guided Study. Nearly all freshmen and sophomores are scheduled into a study hall as one of the eight periods of their school day. Guided Study replaces this traditional study hall for students who are experiencing academic difficulty in two or more courses. It is a small study hall of up to eight students with a teacher who provides tutorial assistance and who may also address students' motivation, organizational skills, study habits, and communication skills. The teacher has regular contact with each student's teachers and parents. The expectation is that a student's placement in

Guided Study will be short term and that the student will develop the skills necessary to sustain academic success.

A similar but more intensive program for students who are academically unsuccessful is the Mentor Program. Not only does it take the place of a student's study hall, but the student is also scheduled for a second period. Of the two class periods in the Mentor Program, one is spent on teaching study skills, for which the student receives academic credit, and the other is spent on tutorial assistance. Other concerns that are directly addressed include motivation, attitude, goal setting and communication skills. The Mentor teacher has regular contact with each student's teachers to monitor progress and schedules regular conferences with parents. Again, the expectation is that a student's placement in the Mentor Program will be short term and the student will develop the skills necessary to sustain academic success.

Special education programs have been notorious for pulling students out of mainstream classes and educating them separately. At Stevenson, we are modifying special education programs in accordance with the Regular Education Initiative (REI). Rather than pulling students out of classrooms to receive services, special education students and teachers, when possible, are being assigned to mainstream classes. In many cases, students with special needs are assisted within the mainstream classroom by the special education teacher.

Introductory math and science courses receive the most support. Special education teachers attend these classes daily with their students. Their roles range from quietly assisting their students in class activities, to virtually team teaching

with the subject area teacher. Likewise, health classes have special education teachers who assist students during class daily. Social studies classes do not have a special education teacher in attendance, but they are contacted regularly by a designated special education teacher. This teacher may offer assistance in developing instructional activities, in arranging for alternate testing, or in managing the classroom.

Special needs students have benefitted from this inclusionary approach. They are academically successful, and they do not suffer the stigma of being pulled out and treated differently. Although REI efforts have increased the range of abilities in the classroom, mainstream teachers benefit from the special education teacher's expertise in designing lessons and instructional activities for the special needs students.

Looking ahead

As we look to the future it is obvious that staff development will play a major role in our reform efforts. To sustain the modifications that were made, we need to continue to provide teachers with the knowledge and skills necessary for creating successful learning experiences for all of our students. Our staff development committee has made a commitment to offer a series of in-depth programs that focus on teaching and learning. These programs will address the topics of alternative assessments, authentic teaching, problem-based learning, and learning centered classrooms. Our staff development resources will be spent on furthering the vision of our school: helping each student become successful.

We will continue to nurture a school climate that fosters experimentation and risk taking. In the 1993-94 school year we are piloting an interdisciplinary program for the "average student." This experimental program features block scheduling with maximum flexibility in the use of teacher time; team teaching and co-planning to facilitate a more unified and integrated approach to the students' core curricula; and an emphasis on application and relevance to the "real world" through problem-based learning and cooperative learning. The curriculum will help students make connections, not only with the various subjects, but with society as well.

As a school, we believe that all children can learn; that all children are capable of academic success; and that teachers are responsible for creating opportunities for students to be successful. Organizing instruction and curriculum in ways that support a sorting and selecting educational process is inconsistent with those beliefs. As "intelligent consumers" of educational research we will continue to read the research critically and apply those innovations that we believe would advance our vision for our school. We will also seek out schools where alternative practices are having success and investigate the possibility of their application in our school.

We have learned that there is no recipe for reforming instructional grouping practices. Each school is different, as is each department within the school. The best approaches to ability grouping reform may differ among schools as well as among departments in schools. In essence, we should not be looking for a model to follow. We will only become frustrated when we don't find one. It is important that prior to initiating any type of change in grouping practices, a school needs to critically

assess the impact of its current grouping practices on curriculum, instruction and student learning. Only when a school understands the consequences of its current instructional grouping practices, can it begin a calculated and purposeful reform process.

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